

Graduate Women NZ - Mid-term report

Kate Spill – January 2020 – candidate in Doctorate of Clinical Psychology

Kia ora GWNZ, I am happy to present you with my progress report. The last year has once again been a whirlwind of activity across all three areas of my doctoral programme in clinical psychology - three clinical placements, coursework, and research and so this progress report is quite late! As most of my focus was on my clinical placements last year, I thought I would give you some insights into what it was like working as an intern psychologist for me and how my research has informed this practice.

Last year I was working with young people in student health and counselling environments and also with Explore, an organization contracted to help families who have a child whose behaviour challenges partially due to their disability. Part of the work with young people in student health environments was under the umbrella of the Piki programme – a government initiative to provide free mental health treatment for young people aged 18-25 years in primary care. It is currently being piloted in Greater Wellington across a number of primary care organizations based on a successful UK model. In the UK this model of having a mental health clinician in primary care – right where a person's GP is - has helped large numbers of people gain access to talking therapy. As mental health care provided by our District Health Boards only caters to people at the moderate-to-severe end of distress and impairment, large numbers of people have no access to care. The goal of Piki is to address this gap for young people.

It was certainly eye opening to me to see day-to-day in my work the levels of distress young people were coping with. Many people would imagine that young university students would be on the whole doing well – after all they had made it to university. What I saw was many young people with significant mental health challenges in the moderate end of severity, which were impacted by the difficulty in finding affordable housing, needing to work long hours in part time jobs 20-30 hours per week on top of university work. The challenges of being a young adult in the world - what we call the 'developmental tasks' in psychology – were an important part of the work also. In my work this often meant thinking about increasing independence from their family of origin, intimate partner experiences, gender and sexuality, or working out what path to take next in life, and who to be in the world. Anxiety around climate change and broader social justice issues were topics which often came up too. Sometimes young peoples would have additional challenges, such as undetected learning disabilities or neurodiversity such as autism spectrum or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Detecting these was a helpful service which psychology can provide. When detected and understood a person is in a better position to learn helpful strategies, get treatment, and modify their day to day living. This was also a rewarding part of my work – being able to put the practice I had learnt in class to good use.

My internship also gave me a chance to reflect on how my doctoral research had influenced my clinical practice. At first when thinking about this I could see some clear and specific links but nothing major crystallized. It took a while to realise that the influence of conducting research had been slow but had in fact

been quite major. At its essence, the influence of my doctoral research has been the ability to hold opposites in tension without resolving them. The process of doing science requires attention to ethics, care of participants, and anticipating potential for harm. It also requires navigating bureaucracy, being persistent, while also being creative and flexible in problem solving and considering trade-offs along the way—in methodology, in approach, in what is possible. So many aspects are in tension: it requires being persuasive while not overreaching. It requires standing your ground at times, while being open to changing your mind. It requires keeping your cool, as it can be emotionally demanding, as well as speaking with authority at times when you know just how little you do know in a vast field. As a doctoral candidate, you are also invited to wear a ‘cloak of expertise’ in your topic area, represent the ideals of your university, and step up. In this way, you are not “just a student” any longer. In the details of your investigation, you may know more than your supervisory team. Taking on authority in your area of investigation requires confidence but also care as people listen to what you now say. They might quote you. In all these ways, doctoral research is a process of taking on a new role with many inherent tensions, just as clinical work is also. At the heart of clinical work, for instance, is the tension between the individual client (their life and context, history and experiences) and what psychological science says about their presenting problems. Psychological science tells us things about groups of people. In quantitative research, effects of moderate size are reasonably rare; so you need reasonably large groups of people to find these effects. Typically, psychological findings also have a variety of moderating and mediating factors involved. Hence, when using psychological knowledge to formulate what might be going on with a client careful, tentative work is required which on the one hand honours the evidence-based approach, while on the other hand attends to the individual in their context. Clinical psychologists are therefore experts in their area who do not wish to take the expert role in session, and need to be able to adjust their formulations and approach. Expertise is brought to the table, in a humble way with the awareness that acting ethically is also about taking care with the power inherent in the clinical relationship. Ethics must come before practice in this respect, just as it does with research. Tolerating the various tensions inherent in the work is part of that.

Thank you once again Graduate Women NZ for supporting my progress as a doctoral student. One more year to go, and then hopefully I will have completed all the requirements to fully launch back into the world post study!

Nga mihi nui,

Kate Spill